

Western MRS Meeting Notes  
April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
AB Tech, Asheville

Counties Present: Buncombe, Catawba, Gaston, Henderson, McDowell, Mitchell, Swain, Transylvania, Yancey

Introductions

Announcements Evaluation, DCD Letters

Accountability 100% accountable, why, Fish principles, How do we get there?

Closing In Home Services

Non-Compliance Petitions

Announcements

- DCDs
  - Individual training assessment on ncswlearn: Part A tells you what trainings are required vs Recommended, Part B self assessment it will look at your training history and interests and tell what trainings you might be interested in.
  - Family Violence Grants
  - PIP has been approved by Feds.
  - RIL can look at the history of changes on RIL
- Evaluation - Duke has been looking at the data from the MRS system. 92% of cases where 109 information has been entered into the MRS database does not have any 215. Possibly will result in making the database require some type of entry in 215 before you can proceed to 109.

Accountability

When Holly travels she frequently hears we don't have that service here or trouble with getting some other agency to do their job which allows us (DSS) to do our job better. System of Care should be able to help address this. In this vein, what does 100% accountability mean to you?

- Following standards
- Family Centered practice
- Planning ahead being able to deal with surprise situations and not letting required tasks fall by the wayside.
- FISH principles Be there: when you are at work, be at work, you may have a lot going on at home etc., but do your best to be at work while you are supposed to be there. This also means coaching your co-workers when appropriate and being willing to accept coaching from them as well.
- Good communications being willing to ask for help if you need it from co-workers or supervisor, communicating with families to try to make services available at times that work for them.
- How do you do this with community partners?
  - Treatment team meetings including everyone on the plan.

- Be very cautious that we have done our part before we go blaming other agencies. For example Mental Health they are a huge issue, but we can't just blame them for everything. We have to ensure that we have given them the required documentation, etc. and then hold them accountable. Don't go blaming Mental Health when you have not done all the things that you were supposed to do and that is part of the reason that they couldn't put services in place.
- Supervisors must be available for workers and also make sure that workers know the resources that are available to help them if they can't make all their visits because of court or other conflicts.
  - One county has a buddy system so that they can cover for each other when they are on vacation or have a really intensive case, or a lot of court dates.
  - Supervisors must also make it clear to workers what is expected of them, and then hold them to those expectations. Also means that supervisors must hold up their end of the expectations
- Accountability to other counties when they get a request for an assist.
- Flexibility for workers to flex time if needed, including comp time if necessary.
- Set standards with percentages. Don't always make everything 100% because you are setting everyone up for failure. There may be some things where 100% is a reasonable expectation, but look at what is realistic.
- May need to look at standards again when things change, like you have staff turnover. 93% of reports within a month may be reasonable when you have 15 cases, but when you end up with an average of 30 that might not be as reasonable.
- Philosophy Shift required for a real change in accountability. If you don't buy into whatever you are trying to do and truly feel it is necessary then it is hard to have accountability.
- This is particularly true with absent parents Dad's role in that child's life may not be huge, but he can have a place in the child's life if people work together to figure out what role would work best for all involved.
- What have you done to advance a change in philosophy?
  - Bulletin board about finding absent parents that is right there when you walk in so that it is on people's minds.
  - Take the time to let people talk it through and express their initial reservations.
- What are things that you might do when you get back to your county?
  - Holly needs feedback, wants to hear when she is doing well as well as things that may need improvement. She wanted to ask the counties she works with to let her know, so now Patrick will ask counties how she was able to assist them when she came out, and also if there were any areas where she could be stronger.

## Other Issues that came out

### Mental Health

- If you have a MH agency that is failing to do their part, please be sure to do your part, document your interactions with them, and if they fail, please hold them accountable and lodge an official complaint. This is the only way that the State will be aware of the extent of the problem with some of these agencies that are hiring anyone off the street.

### Absent Parent policy

- There is a lot of concern about absent parents in 215 services. This is not the same thing as in 109 when you are looking for potential placement. Counties feel that they are creating a lot of Jerry Springer moments by bringing these families back together when they don't want to be, may end up hurting child if we don't use caution. There is a group meeting on developing policy for this in Raleigh. Will be able to use common sense and know that there is not a one-size fits all policy for all families.

## Closing In Home Services Cases

Do you feel comfortable that staff know when it is time to close a case? What are some of the indicators that let you know it is time to close?

- One county has weekly conferences, so worker is aware of when the case should be moving to closure. Examples: family is following the case plan, risk factors have been removed or reduced.
- Go through the tools and look at the definitions and when the risk gets to low.
  - Train their workers and the family that there may be some times that the risk reassessment tool rates the risk as low when we know that this is not true. Explain this to the family and the ones that they don't feel like are accurate on the risk reassessment and they have found that the family usually agrees with them and supports their decision to override the risk reassessment.
- Difficult cases are those where the parents won't to anything in the case plan, but there is nothing else occurring that meets the level of abuse/neglect. Won't come in for a CFT or anything. Usually in cases with teenagers. There is no clear progress, nor another incident, so what to do?
- Look at well being issues and collaterals to get a truer picture of what is going on with the family.
- Sometimes you have to cut your losses and close the case. If there is moderate risk but not enough to file a petition to force compliance, sometimes you have to close. Buncombe has team staffings for cases like this. So there are multiple supervisors involved in the decision to close. They include language in the closing letter stating that although you have not taken advantage of any of the services offered by DSS while your case was open. We are closing the case but encourage you to consider taking advantage of services to address x,y, and z. Also mention that further incidents may result in further involvement by DSS.
- What are problems with closing cases feel like workers may be missing the point.

- Had a case where the issue was substance abuse, and there had never been a CFT. The supervisor went out with the worker, and it turned out there was no evidence of mom having being a substance abuser. In fact she had drug screens where she was negative.
- Think that sometimes assessors are still too incident focused and one time incidents lead to families going into 215 and there is not a clear goal what are you trying to fix? This is getting better but not where it should be.
- This plays into reasons people can't see to have a CFT. If there are no issues that you can see to have a CFT around, then you should probably close the case.
- A supervisor from a blended team discussed staffing the cases jointly before the case is transferred. This fosters accountability can't just transfer the case to a nameless person, the assessor has to defend their decision in front of the case manager and the supervisor.
- In Home is the section of the agency most liable. We have said there is a risk but we are leaving the child in the home and left in-home services to be responsible, because we don't want to take custody either, so in-home services is stuck with this situation and in the middle.
- Parents voluntarily gave non-legal custody to grandparents case went to in-home and while there parents came back and wanted their kids back. Don't have a report on the parents (who had SA problems) and mom is not open for services but she is back in town. If she moves back into the home she is then factored on the safety assessment and can affect it.
  - Don't think of it as keeping mom's or grandma's case open this is the child's case. We are there for the safety of the children, and anything that affects the welfare of the children is relevant to the case. You need to explain to grandma about why we are still involved if it was determined to be an isolated incident with her but let her know that you are there for the welfare of the children and mom showing back up may jeopardize that.

### Non-Compliance Petitions

Requested that we not call them non-compliance petitions, and instead call them Petitions without Non-Secure or Petition for Court Ordered Services .

About half of the counties here do these.

Why do we do these, how are they helpful?

- This is the last resort before removal, because we want to keep these children in the home. Buncombe files a lot of petitions 96-98% of in-home cases do not go to foster care. Can't say for sure which ones of those would have been in custody, but know that a good number of those would have. Particularly with kinship placements the parents have given informal custody to relatives and then the parents won't give legal custody and also won't take their own children back, and when they go to court, the judge gives custody.
- Do the other people that do them think it works?
- If you can get the parents involved with SA treatment that usually helps all the other issues fall into place.

- Question of counties that their attorneys don't allow it why don't their attorneys allow it?
  - Said that their attorneys say that it is not legal.
- When the attorneys don't want to do this, one county says it should be a social work decision to file the petition. It is not about winning, it is about presenting that petition in court. The attorney works for the social workers. It is the attorney's job to prepare the petition in a legally proper way. If they do not win DSS has done what it could to bring the matter to the attention of the court. However, you must have the support of your higher ups in your county.
- There needs to be the ability of the county DSS to contact the AG's office and tell them that they cannot get the help they need from the county attorney and there are children in danger. This is not something that the County Director can do it is bigger than them, and often is so political.
- When they say non-compliance the judges and lawyers hear that as we just want to punish the family for not doing what we wanted them to do. They don't realize that there are a lot of non-compliant families that we don't file petitions on and these are filed due to a safety issue. Changing the terminology of the petition may help attorneys be more inclined to file them.
- The attorneys are concentrating on if a case is winnable, not the safety of the children. We know there are some times you need to take an unwinnable case to court.
- However, there is a part of their concern with winnable cases that is legitimate. If the attorney takes every case to court that we want to, even if they are inappropriate, the attorney will begin to lose credibility and we need to understand and respect that.
- Some counties have also asked attorneys to attend to staffings and trainings so they understand how these things affect children. We can't make them go, but we can invite them.
- How can we educate attorneys?
  - Court Improvement Conference
  - If there is a nearby county that does these petitions, see if your attorney can talk to the attorney in that county. The attorney may receive this better from peers than social workers.
- Sometimes you will end up getting custody of these children when that was not your original intent. Have to look at all possible outcomes.
- Also let the family know that you have prepared a petition, don't necessarily have to file it, and sometimes that acts as a wakeup call. Also let them know what will happen when the case goes to court, that it will be out of DSS's hands, there will be other people making the decisions (judge) and other people involved (GAL).
- CCPT can this be of any help with this? They are a community group that could possibly help.
- Take kinship provider cases to court. Moving from kinship care to other kinship care is as harmful to the child as multiple foster care placements. DSS must be accountable to the potential harm of the child even if they are kinship

care instead of in foster care. If you see the kinship placement is about to terminate, even if there is another one lined up, you need to go to court.

- Struggle how to handle minor children who are subject to a petition and one of those children has a baby.
- It would be really nice if attorneys and judges had to attend some levels of training before being involved in juvenile cases.
- Back to the accountability issue, decisions made by the court, are something that are out of our control but we (DSS) are being held 100% accountable by the community and the press.
- Sometimes there is a disconnect between policy and the statute. The judges and attorneys may not be familiar with new statute, but even if they are, they may interpret the statute differently than our policy does. Having policy language that is as close to the statute as possible may help attorneys.

#### Other Discussion Questions and Possible Topics for Future Meetings

- Working with families where English is not their first language when you have to try to call and arrange a visit without an interpreter on staff how to you handle this?
  - Other counties have called an interpreter to make the appointment. But it is hard if you are not there with the interpreter when they are making the call, because the family will have lots of questions about why you are coming out.
  - There is also a phone line service where everyone can be on the line at the same time.
  - Sometimes you can get someone at a community center to make a call.
  - Pastors may also be willing to do this.
  - Sometimes teachers of a particular language will do it but they may have restrictions on their availability and you must respect that if you want to continue to use their services.
  - If you get an outside interpreter to make the call, anticipate some of the questions the family may have and let the interpreter know these answers so that you don't have to sit there until the interpreter reaches them.
  - One agency has one person that is bilingual but don't want to overload him - this is one of those things that has to go on a case by case basis maybe he gets skipped in rotation if he is helping on a bilingual case.
- DV cases where Dad has left home so he is not complying but Mom and the children are. You are almost ready to close the case with the condition that Dad cannot come back. What do you do if he comes back?
  - You have to plan for his return what if he comes back. Call DV people in your community and get their expert opinion on your particular case.

#### May meetings:

Central: Stanly Co DSS - 21<sup>st</sup>

Western: Asheville, AB Tech - 27<sup>th</sup>  
East: Bladen Co DSS - 22<sup>nd</sup>

June meetings:

Central: Burlington 18<sup>th</sup> (this is tentative)  
Western: Jackson County - 19<sup>th</sup> (this is still tentative)  
East: Wilson Co DSS - 17<sup>th</sup>